

First Opinion: Shivers and Smiles from *The Dangerous Alphabet*

Gaiman, Neil. *The Dangerous Alphabet*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

Joan I. Glazer

The Dangerous Alphabet by Neil Gaiman is described in the preface as “a piratical ghost story in thirteen ingenious but potentially disturbing rhyming couplets.” Also noted is that this particular alphabet is “not to be relied upon.” The book does use the alphabet as an organizational structure for the narrative and its pirate treasure theme, and if you expect “v” to come before “w,” then yes, it is not to be relied upon. Are the couplets disturbing? Yes, exactly the way that sitting around a campfire, listening to ghost stories, deliciously frightened while holding hands with your friend, is disturbing—but also fun.

The cover sets the mood, as two Victorian-looking children and their pet gazelle, complete with bright pink ribbon around its neck, run from creatures and alphabet blocks that come tumbling after them. The story then begins as the children sneak past their father, who is assiduously reading his newspaper, climb into a tin boat with a metal fish head at the front and a fin at the back, and set off on a trip on a canal-sewer, the girl clinging to a treasure map. Along the way, they encounter a variety of monsters, often dressed in suits and ties; there may be a mouse peeking out of a pocket or a head that is only a skull. Some creatures attempt to capture the children, but others simply continue with their own quirky activities. At the end of the trip, their father awaits them, still with newspaper in hand, but this time aware of and smiling at the children.

The humor, the mock-macabre style, and the enticing details make this book more appropriate for readers beyond the stage of letter recognition than for the very young. “E’s for Evil, that lures and entices” shows the children being offered candy. And “L is like ‘eaven, their last destination” requires some sophistication, even if one can assess the flames below the pot in which children are being roasted as a hint. Still, each page does have many objects that begin with the letter in the rhyme. T may be for “Treasure, heaped in a pile,” but within that pile is a television, a telephone, toadstools, a teddy bear, a toilet, a typewriter, and other “t” treasures.

Fans of Neil Gaiman’s writing—either his books, his films, or his comics, but particularly *The Sandman* series—will recognize and not be disappointed in the clever couplets. Those who know Gris Grimly’s work, especially his illustrations for the songs in *Sipping Spiders through a Straw: Campfire Songs for Monsters*, will look for humorous details within the horror. The pairing of these two seems to be a match made in “eaven.” And if you have enjoyed books by Edward Gorey, this book’s for you.

Works Cited

- Di Pucchio, Kelly. *Sipping Spiders Through a Straw: Campfire Songs for Monsters*. Illus. by Gris Grimly. New York: Scholastic, 2008. Print.
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About the Author

Joan Glazer is Professor Emeritus at Rhode Island College. She is President of Bookbird, Inc., the board that oversees the publication of *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, the journal of the International Board on Books for Young People.

Second Reaction: A Dangerous Alphabet or Just an Indulgence?

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When I first handed this book to parents or children, they were clearly unsure what to make of the front cover with its skewed perspectives and unusual juxtaposition of kid things like alphabet blocks, a cute animal with a big bow around its neck, and a swarm of adult male characters who look like gangsters and pirates. Nevertheless, several adults and a few children bravely turned the page. Some parents paused long enough to read the foreword and raised their eyebrows quizzically before they silently went through the book. Those parents who did not read the foreword but began thumbing through the book never made it through the entire book before exclaiming, “What age child is this book intended for?” By the end of their reading all the parents were firm in their convictions that they would never share this book with their preschool age child because: 1) the alphabet letters themselves are not very clearly presented visually (“the letters look breezily brush painted onto walls in mud-brown”), 2) the rhymed text is very often vague, undecipherable, or outside the scope or interest of a little child (“K’s but a kiss, lovers glow with elation” [Gaiman]), 3) the illustrations are too busy, not attractive in appearance and hideous in content (“blood, torture, kidnapping, and general nightmare-inducing mayhem”).

“Life is scary enough, why would anyone want to put such images into a little child’s mind?” asked one parent. When directed back to the foreword, most parents were a little more understanding of why the book existed but still puzzled as to what age would enjoy such a book. Many of the parents who saw the book did not think their elementary age children would like the book either.

“By the time you reach an age where the book wouldn’t give you nightmares,” one parent suggested, “you would be at an age when you wouldn’t pick up picture books, especially alphabet books to read.” Her ten-year-old son agreed. He is into *Harry Potter* and *Eragon*. He doesn’t have time for alphabet books.

The following is a ten-year-old girl’s review of the book:

I picked it up to flip through when I was supposed to be doing my school work and I thought it was kind of interesting but I wasn’t looking at it very closely. I went back later for a second, more careful read and while there were a few things I found interesting, I was searching for something nice to say about it. By the third look, I really didn’t like the book at all. It is certainly filled with apprehension—you’d think the kids would turn back.

If you don't look carefully at the pictures, you might not notice it but the images are gross. The art looks like it is not careful. It is more wispy and unsure and it seems like that makes it more evil. When I saw the tree man again towards the end of the story, I thought "Oh, maybe the whole story is just in the tree guy's head and he tells the story to the kids and drew pictures and made it so vivid the children thought they were really going through it." But, I think that is just wishful thinking on my part. Really, the story has a very unsatisfactory ending because he only managed to save his sister. The others are underground being stewed into pie, I guess.

In the final analysis, the child said, "The closer you look at it and pay attention the yuckier it is. Once you look at it closely, you never want to read it again."

When asked what age reader she thought might enjoy the book, she was stumped at first, "I don't know. I don't think my little sister would like it, and I wouldn't want it to give her nightmares. I can't think who would like it. She, like the other 10-year-old reviewer, said, "The kids that are old enough to read it wouldn't pick up an alphabet book to read, and it wouldn't do much to teach little kids the alphabet."

Do children who live in a world of "Amber Alerts" and murder reports on television and radio news want to read such a tale? Given a choice, in this case, no. All the parents were convinced that the book was not for the enjoyment of a child audience but for the amusement of the book's creators and the occasional teen or adult who would bother to look at it closely and perhaps make connections to other stories or literary devices. The children who looked at the book thought it to be an unappealing read. Although avid readers, they would rather not spend time on this kind of book. They didn't like much of the art and overall thought it was too dark and sinister, especially as an alphabet book.

Tomi Ungerer's work echoes in this book, but Grimly's art is more macabre. Some images seem rough sketches for scenes from the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*, but they are lacking the humor of a Jack Sparrow. Perhaps this is the alphabet book of the Addams family? But would their children be familiar with Sweeney Todd (check out "O is for ovens, far under the street" [Gaiman]).

It could be argued that this is a cautionary tale. After all, the children sneak away from dear old dad who has his head buried in the newspaper. Or that it is a bildungsroman with the boy leaving safety behind and then rising to the occasion to persist and rescue his sister with his trusty companion, their pet gazelle. Ultimately, it comes across as a fun indulgence for the author and illustrator that has little to do with children except to use them as primary characters in story. Everyone seemed to agree with one young reader's assertion, "There are a lot of great books out there; I would rather be reading one of them instead!"

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About the Author

Priya Johnson is currently homeschooling fifth grade, coaching FIRST Lego League Robotics, and helping lead middle school and junior high students and their parents in literature studies in the Atlanta area.